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Classicism of Washington

Doctrine Applied to Local Conditions

BY CHARLES A. STARKS.

Mr. Webster defines the word "classic" as meaning the best; pure; of the first class or rank. And out of this we get the usual suffixed Classicism which is generally applied to well established patent thought or a particular quality. The word is often misused by our people, for instance they term an ordinary sentimental song "classical," when it really calls for deep thought, science, philosophy and the usage of time to impart the classic nature to anything. This is why the Greeks are held in such high esteem because not even time has been able to change or alter some of the wise sayings of their day.

Then it will also take time to fully prove the classicism of Booker T. Washington's peculiar message to the world. Notwithstanding that he is reasonably appreciated by his contemporaries—his detractors as well as his admirers, that he has many of both is sufficient apology for the birth of this article, as the papers are usually full of his praise and detraction.

The latest classic hit the untrammeled exemplar has delivered, took place in Muskogee, Okla., during the session of the National Negro Business League.

In his speech he used this simple axiom: Beautify the places you already have. This, however, has been the signal for those powerful cannons to let loose their fiery contents upon the author of these words, and attempt annihilation of one whom they have sworn "must fall" as the Romans said of Carthage. Beautify the places you already have—is an injunction the Negro needs every hour, and is especially true in Kansas City when you look around and see the thousand little improvements many could make in their homes and in their places of business, which, if made, would certainly beautify them a hundredfold.

It is a duty imposed upon man to improve that which shelters and protects him. It matters not how humble this may be if the spirit of improvement is carried out, the place receives the hallowed blessing which follows good. If we do not take proper care of a simple cottage or flat, we certainly will not take care of a mansion. It is the same old story. Being faithful in a few things. Any person or family living in a great cultured city, who shall not sweep the sidewalk and approaches, and keep their windows clean (this is always the first step) do not deserve the Best in housing conditions, for it is plain that they would not appreciate the Finest if they had it. This goes for White and Black.

Beautify the places you already have. Ye that own homes. Repair that broken fence; paint that house; plant and cultivate that flower bed; impart an appearance of general order and neatness everywhere; take an interest in street improvements, and be a disciple of civic righteousness in the community in which you live. Remember the only proper way to fight evil is with Good Works. If we have been segregated, remember that segregation destroys itself and that those who advocate it often give great advantages (unconsciously) to those segregated. For instance, there is more social unity among Negroes in Kansas City today than ever. We have a business district of our own which is playing a large part in our economic life—something we could not boast of ten years ago, and an all-Negro residential section which is far from being bad. This consolidation means more than the superficial observer generally understands. It means if the Negroes live together, beautify their homes, and solidify their aims, that they are going to gain a power to not only stop the encroachment of the Whites, but spread the wings of Ethiopia even unto the enemy's camp. If in union there is strength, then, in a command of people where there is a reasonable Oneness of spirit, there is nothing that can hamper that people in improving their conditions.

There are many, many desirable homes which Colored people own and live in, in Kansas City, and general housing conditions are fairly good. Then by way of preservation and improvement there is classicism in what Dr. Washington says: Beautify the places we already have. This will add value, charm, grace and everything that really makes our abode a good place in which to live. By the way! If the heads of some of our public institutions could only catch a little of this fire for beauty, then they would see that their janitors would not sleep half the time and pitch horseshoes the other half, instead of keeping the buildings clean, spick and span. Outside banisters repaired and painted, the lawn well kept, window shades rolled even, floors scrubbed and a general clean-cut appearance. Who ever is guilty of this Neglect, "Him have I offended!"

Critic Answer.

If we truly believe in a thing we will proceed to demonstrate it in a practical way.

Men are prone to "take sides" without weighing properly that which they pretend to advocate. To rightly champion any particular line of thought one must practice or live it. This is what gives Dr. Washington's statements their classic turn. One only has to start to put them in action at once to learn or demonstrate their broad practicability. A few of the best known are these:

Learn to do a common thing in an uncommon manner.

Advertise your advantages (a good business injunction).

Cast down your bucket where you are (which briefly means: Stop looking over yonder and make well of your present opportunities).

These are really infallible, and not even the editor of the Crisis or of the A. M. E. Church Review, can alter these truths.

Porters, waiters and laborers could study the first with good results, and our business men could learn a lesson in the second. Whilst every one including the calamity howler and "never do well" should remember the third. In spite of the plainness of these statements, and the simple truths they convey, there are those detractors who attempt by sarcasm and ridicule to disintegrate them, but with unhappy results. Truth stands for itself, and needs only its nakedness to convince the most skeptical. But we allow that there are other good things advocated by other disciples. Dr. Washington may not know it all, but there are some things that he has said that will surely stand, because they are right.

The only suspicion we have of the venerable Doctor is that he may possess a much higher conception of truth than people imagine. This much is to his credit: A man of his high position in the esteem of the American people can be so kind and even tempered and magnanimous to his enemies. Reminds one of the gentle Saviour who was ever calm, judicious and considerate in the face of scorn and ingratitude.

In looking over some of the national leaders of race, we would style them statesmen, for such they are, though without a strictly political constituency. Of these, if you would want to understand your rights, and how to fight for them, read Dubois; if you want an even balance between two extremes, dwell with Kelly Miller; if you want to be stirred by that glow of a nobler patriotism and more freedom of soul and manhood, listen to Reverdy C. Ransom. But if you want everyday practical guidance, then follow Booker T. Washington. How many will say—Amen?

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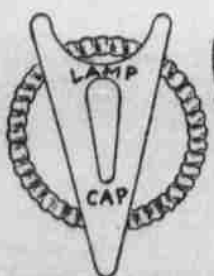
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